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CLOSURE OF SCHOOLS: MEETING WITH MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION

NAPTOSA, together with the other recognised education unions, met with the Minister of Basic Education and her Department on Friday 17 July 2020 to discuss the call for her to consider closing schools for the expected peak period of the COVID -19 pandemic in South Africa between the end of July and September this year.

The meeting noted the following salient issues:

1. Readiness

The education system is under severe pressure with very low attendance since the return to school of the first cohort of learners. The department has not been able to adequately protect teachers, education support personnel and learners by providing them with the necessary protective materials at all schools.

2. The Peak

The virus is approaching its peak, already exceeding 300 000 infections. This makes South Africa the country with the sixth highest infections in the world.

3. Science Evolution

When the debate about reopening of schools began, it was guided by the science that the children were not susceptible to infections and that even if infected, were not infectious, and although they were not likely to infect other children they could infect those with vulnerabilities, especially the elderly, teachers and education workers.

The South African situation has disproved this science with many learners having been infected and some even losing their lives. Evolving science also now supports the possibility that there could be an airborne spread of the virus.

We therefore believe that the advice of the World Health Organisation's (WHO) should be heeded, namely that schools should not remain open when the expected peak of the pandemic in a country is at hand, especially if there is no proper management of the transmission at schools.

4. The inconsistency in the application of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

The different interpretations and applications of the SOPs by departmental officials are making life difficult for principals and teachers. This is compounded by the lack of capacity in our overburdened health care system (Department of Health) to respond to the SOP expectations in some provinces.

5. Disruptions caused by opening and closing of schools

The reported COVID-19 positive cases in schools and the resultant closure of schools are causing fear and anxiety among education staff, learners and parents, negatively impacting teaching and learning. The system also lacks the capacity of attending to the psycho-social needs of staff thereby further enhancing stress levels and leading to an increase in absenteeism of teachers, through applications for sick leave.

6. Inequality

A sizable number of schools have still not reopened due to historical, systemic and infrastructural backlogs. Almost all the schools in the Eastern Cape did not allow the return to school of all their Grade 11, 6 and R learners, because many of these are still in need of water, toilets, additional classrooms and sufficient numbers of teachers to adhere to the directions of the DBE. This is not only an infringement of the right of all learners to education in a conducive environment, but a perpetuation of historical inequalities. Some provinces have already indicated that they are unable to take in the cohort for Monday 20 July.

7. The threat on the salaries of teachers and education support personnel

Teachers have reported for duty from the 25 May 2020 whilst the other sectors, including in government offices, are still working from home and at 30% capacity.

Teachers work throughout the year without asking for overtime payment. They take work home and deny their families time. Teachers work on weekends and holidays without overtime. The teachers have been using their money to run WhatsApp lessons with learners and continue to do so.

It is therefore unfathomable why the State as employer, in the time that they need teachers to be on point more than ever, would threaten not to grant them their rightful, negotiated salary increases.

Resolution

Based on the above, NAPTOSA and the other unions resolved as follows:

- Schools should be closed with immediate effect to allow the peak and winter to pass. The system should use this time to attend to all outstanding issues, including, but not limited to, the provision of water, the building of toilets and additional classes and providing the required number of teachers.

- Schools should reopen at the end of August 2020 unless the situation dictates otherwise.
- The education departments should provide teachers with the necessary tools to work from home and prepare work for the reopening of schools and return of learners.
- Grade 12s should be prioritised and different modes to assist them while they are at home should be investigated. Grade 12s should return on Monday, 17 August 2020.
- The DBE and stakeholders should discuss the curriculum post this calendar year, focusing on reading for the remaining months of 2020.
- The Department of Higher Education and Training should be engaged to consider late registration for First Years in 2021.
- All stakeholders should focus on advocacy campaigns, educating the nation about this invisible enemy but also urging them to follow all precautionary measures, including staying at home.

NAPTOSA will keep members informed of further developments on this matter.

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR